

# “No More Strangers and Foreigners”

*Nell Folkman*

AS I LOOK BACK ON MORE THAN SIXTY YEARS IN THE CHURCH, two changes stand out as being most significant: I have seen my church permit all worthy male members to hold the priesthood, and I have seen my church become truly international in its scope. I get the feeling, however, that the younger generations who are now local leaders do not recognize the revolutionary nature of these changes in the same way that I see them from the perspective of growing up Mormon in small-town Utah.

In those years before World War II, the red rock mountains of the Pavant Range that ringed Sevier Valley circumscribed our lives as well. People who were born there, also lived and married there, raised their children there, watched them do the same, and were finally buried in the cemetery above the canal. The few outsiders who came were always strangers and were looked upon with suspicion. I had heard about people who bore the “curse of Cain,” but I was teenage before I saw a black person, in college when I first spoke to one.

True, this closed shell cracked narrowly when I was fourteen and my father took me to San Francisco for the World’s Fair. The shiver of excitement and goosebumps of wonder at seeing skyscrapers, the ocean, billows of fog rolling in through the Golden Gate, China Town, the ferry ride to Treasure Island and the lights of the World’s Fair remain with me. I had never imagined that such wonderful places and strange and exotic people existed.

World War II changed all of us. The world no longer consisted simply of Utah. As I became acquainted with people from other races and cultures, they forced the crack wider and I learned that their spirits were as beautiful as those of members of the Church. Yet in the 1940s, when I brought a dark-skinned Polynesian sister to my home ward, people stared and whispered. No one spoke

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to either of us, and some later asked my mother why she permitted me to do such a thing.

As the years passed, expressions of prejudice and bigotry by many Church members troubled me. Both in Utah and away, they continued long after racist attitudes were considered inappropriate in most places. What troubled me more was that these insensitive words so often came from "good" people of the Church, noted for living the gospel. Furthermore, such expressions appeared to receive church sanction. I felt I was doing right, but I seemed so out of step. I reasoned that this might be why I didn't have the spiritual experiences that others related in testimony meetings. Criticized by many members, and by some local Church leaders as well, for my concern with civil rights for black people, I felt alienated from the body of the Church for a long time; but I continued to be active.

It was, therefore, even more meaningful to me that my first profound spiritual experience came with a humble, even despairing people, who knew nothing of the gospel but who had such dignity and strength of character that their relationship to God could not be questioned.

It occurred a few years ago in Mexico when my husband, a rural sociologist, and I were among the nearly three thousand participants in the *Quinto Congreso Mundial de Sociología Rural* (Fifth International Congress of Rural Sociology). It was my first trip to a Third World country, and I reacted to everything with that same wide-eyed wonder I had felt as a fourteen-year-old in San Francisco. In that short week, I was immersed in problems which were beyond the scope of my imagination. Impressions of that trip are still etched in my mind with photographic clarity.

My stomach churned with nervous anticipation as the bus edged away from the University of Mexico that morning. Of the nearly fifty people on the bus, about half were professional sociologists representing a dozen countries world-wide; the rest were students from the University of Mexico. Only two others were from the United States.

We were headed east of Mexico City to one of Mexico's smallest and poorest states, Tlaxcala, where we could visit some *ejidos* — farmers' collectives — which had been established following breakups of haciendas during various periods of land reform.

As we rode through the crowded streets of Mexico City, the destiny of the population overwhelmed me. I suddenly understood how the Church here could increase by tens of thousands of members each year. Cars jockeyed for position in already full streets; people stood in long lines waiting for buses; houses hugged each other along narrow streets. I couldn't tell if they were being built up or torn down: walls half standing, loose bricks strewn about, incomplete roofs.

Miles of green soccer fields were an open, empty, contrast to the crowded streets. Few players practiced at that early hour — mostly small children busy playing Mexico's favorite game. City dumps crawled with people, sorting and sifting the refuse. Shacks, made from scrounged materials, looked as if they were in imminent danger of falling down.

Then we emerged into open country. Farm lands were interspersed with huge factories, giant magnets pulling the iron-filing work force through the gates.

Beyond Puebla, the road climbed toward the high plateau. One volcanic peak soared above endless miles of grassland where prized bulls were once raised for honor and glory in bullfight arenas. The crumbling hacienda hinted at former grandeur.

A village of a dozen or so widely scattered, identical cinderblock dwellings, of perhaps two rooms, lay a few miles beyond the hacienda. A few bright geraniums sat in pots on covered cement patios cluttered with farm tools and diverse objects waiting to be used. Two brown-eyed children laughed as they competed on the swings in the summer-abandoned schoolyard.

*Campeños* in faded blue jeans and straw hats gathered for our meeting outside the long cinderblock meeting hall. Smoking and talking in low tones, they eyed the approaching strangers. The women came later, carefully picking their way down the dirt roads, sidestepping mud puddles left from the night's rain. They stopped just short of the men, their shawls drawn tightly around themselves and their babies against a cool wind. I was embarrassed to be intruding on their lives, embarrassed that, with all my education, I couldn't speak to them.

One of the first uprisings by *campesinos* occurred here at *Tierra y Libertad* in about 1910. Led by Zapata, these peasants were encouraged to strike against the near-slavery conditions enforced by the hacienda. In the fields they stood in unsuccessful protest — farm implements their only weapons against government soldiers.

In later reforms they received some land and formed the *Ejido Colective Tierra y Libertad*. In this *ejido*, each man of the collective owned a small piece of land which he could farm as he wished. Members also worked on the collective farm. Tools and machinery, as well as profits from the collective, were shared.

Community leaders discussed their *ejido's* history and problems. (Our translator, a young woman from Mexico City, had difficulty with rural expressions. A volunteer from a multi-national corporation in Mexico City, she was as new to this experience as we were.) While this land had been suitable for grazing bulls, it was poor land for farming. The growing season of the high plateau was too short for most crops except barley and potatoes. Their harvest often coincided with the rainiest weather. Half the time, the crops were lost, perpetuating their poverty.

"If we had better seeds," they said, "plants bred for this high altitude, crops might mature and be ready for harvest before the rainy season. We were never trained to farm," they went on. "We need someone to come and teach us good farming practices."

They talked of their growing population. "There is no more land. Our plots are too small to divide. Our children are precious; we don't want them to leave home and try to find a job in the city. There are already too many people looking for jobs and there are none."

Land reform had promised freedom and a move up from poverty for the *campesinos*. But perhaps the *ejidos* were an empty dream. Only the poorest land was taken from the large land holders. Although the *campesinos* gained political freedom, the continuing poverty held them in bondage as surely as before.

This was the story we heard again and again in the *ejidos*. Still, in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds and the constant cloud of discouragement, they continued with courage, doing their best with what they had, working together for the community's success. In some places, where the government had provided training and capital, the collectives were beginning to make some progress. In others, government intervention was seen (and with good reason) as bungling.

On our last day we took a long ride, mostly on dirt roads into the remote back country to *Plan de Ayala*. Casting long shadows on the rough green hillside, the afternoon sun reflected gold from the tiny windows of shacks dotting the hill. Trod into deep ruts by many feet, rough walking paths wound from one house to another. In the tall grass, barefoot youngsters played the universal games of childhood. Their shouts and laughter echoed back and forth across the hill, blending with the barking of dogs, the occasional moo of a cow and crow of a rooster. The sun was low now, and the evening chill of the high plateau began to creep in.

We held our meeting in *Plan de Ayala's* only public building — a small, square cinderblock schoolhouse. Inside, dim light revealed a large handworked table and a dozen or so rough homemade desks each accompanied by a small backless bench. Similar benches lined the walls. As the *ejido* members filed into the room one by one, we crowded together to make room for them. Men, women, and children came — some standing, some sitting, packing the room. It was nearly dark now, and the whir of a gas motor signaled the operation of a tiny generator which provided electricity for a single bare bulb which cast an eerie light over our group.

Beginning the meeting, our tour guide, a young doctor of anthropology from the University of Mexico, stood up to explain the purpose of the gathering. She was interrupted almost immediately by a strong voice from the rear of the hall. We all looked at a scruffy man, mustache drooping at the corners of his mouth, a three-day stubble of beard on his face, longish, uncombed hair, and teeth yellow where they weren't missing. As he spoke, the translator attempted to explain what he was saying.

"This isn't the way we do things here. If we are going to have a meeting, then we will elect a *presidente* to preside. Anyone can be nominated. You [he gestured toward us strangers] or any of us."

Someone else stood up to take charge of the nominations. The people from the *ejido* who were nominated came up in front and the vote was taken by raised hands. At first most of us "outsiders" hesitated to vote, but joined when we were chided. "Everybody vote. That's our way. One person, one vote. You! Us! All the same!"

The newly elected *presidente* looked like the stereotype of an unschooled, underprivileged, unkempt peasant. To my amazement, he conducted a model

meeting — democratic, business-like. He kept the discussion going, kept people on track, and stopped people who talked too long. Most important, he made sure everyone who wanted to speak got a chance.

Our young translator had a difficult time because the experience was so far from her sheltered upbringing. She frequently paused in her explanations, looked embarrassed, and said, “He said . . . a . . . a . . . some bad language.”

Their story went like this: When the *ejido* was first formed, their leaders, better educated than the rest, helped secure the rights of the *campesinos*. Once the *ejido* got started, however, the leaders betrayed them, dividing the land and taking the best for themselves. The rest of the *ejido* members were left to fend for themselves. Because of this, the *ejido* members distrusted all leadership; this is why they had been offended when an outsider stood up and took control of the meeting without being elected.

The men spoke passionately about their *ejido*. Land should belong to no one. It had been given by God to all the people. This was their ancient way. Their ancestors hadn’t understood when the Spaniards came and took the land; they hadn’t objected to someone else living there, for it belonged to everyone. They realized their mistake only after the conquerors had deprived them of their own land. At this *ejido*, all things were held in common, but it was clear that the *campesinos* had not been indoctrinated by outside Marxist agitators.

One after another, the *campesinos* stood and talked. We had heard the story before, but here the problems were magnified. “You’re all experts,” they accused us. “What should we do? You tell us.” We had no answers. We kept our embarrassed silence.

In contrast to the passive, shy women of the other *ejidos* who wrapped their feelings quietly in their shawls, these women stood up and spoke passionately about their children. They had been promised that if the *ejido* built a school, a teacher would be provided. Because education was the way out of poverty, they sacrificed dearly to build the school. But no teacher came. They had also been promised a traveling doctor or nurse to help with medical problems. The children were still sick and dying. There was still no help.

As they spoke, the young woman stopped translating, choked with tears. Suddenly I realized that I didn’t need a translator to understand what they were saying. Their eloquence was that of a universal motherhood, fighting to build a better life for cherished children. Their strength was sisterhood born of poverty and hardship.

I had heard of people having the gift of tongues, understanding what was being said in another language, soul talking to soul, but I had never witnessed it. Now it was happening to me. I knew what they were saying. I felt what they were feeling. I longed to gather them in my arms and ease their burdens. If only I could! They were my sisters and their poverty and need made me poor. I also had a sure knowledge that they, and I, were loved by our Heavenly Father.

It was dark when we came out — no light from the windows, no stars in the sky. We groped our way back to the bus. Everyone was silent — we had been moved and could not easily share our feelings.